

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BEFORE THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS BOARD
DIVISION OF JUDGES

COLORADO FIRE SPRINKLER INC.

and

Case 27-CA-115977
27-CA-120823

ROAD SPRINKLER FITTERS LOCAL
UNION NO. 669, U.A., AFL-CIO

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of Cerritos, California, for the Respondent.

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for the Charging Party.

DECISION

CHARLES J. MUHL, Administrative Law Judge. This case hinges on the nature of the bargaining relationship between the Respondent, Colorado Fire Sprinkler Inc., and Road Sprinkler Fitters Local Union No. 669, as well as on the question of whether the Union brought a timely challenge to the Respondent's cessation of benefit funds contributions. The General Counsel alleges that the Respondent made unilateral changes to employees' terms and conditions of employment by ceasing those contributions following the expiration of the parties' last collective-bargaining agreement, as well as by offering employees a new health insurance plan after the cessation of their union-provided insurance due to the lack of contributions. The Respondent concedes that it made the alleged changes. However, it asserts a number of legal justifications for doing so. Among them are that the parties had an 8(f), as opposed to 9(a), bargaining relationship, and that the allegations are time barred by Section 10(b).

Because the contract language contained in the parties' 2005 assent and interim agreement meets the requirements of *Staunton Fuel & Material*, 335 NLRB 717 (2001), I conclude, as discussed below, that the Respondent and the Union had a 9(a) bargaining relationship. Accordingly, when the parties' collective-bargaining agreement expired on March 31, 2013, the Respondent was required to continue the terms and conditions of that contract, until such time as the parties reached either a new agreement or a bargaining impasse. The failure to

make benefit funds contributions, the resulting termination of the union-provided health insurance plan, and the offering of a new health insurance plan constituted material changes to employees' working conditions. The Respondent unilaterally implemented these changes and does not argue that the parties had reached an impasse in negotiations.

However, I also conclude that the complaint allegations addressing the Respondent's cessation of benefit funds contributions and the associated termination of the union-provided health insurance plan are time barred by Section 10(b). The Union filed the charge that forms the basis of these allegations on October 29, 2013. The 10(b) period ran back 6 months to April 29. I find that the Respondent's initial cessation of benefit fund contributions occurred in January 2013 prior to the expiration of the parties' contract, and that the Union had actual notice of that cessation in mid-March 2013, outside of the 10(b) period. The Union also did not file the charge until more than 6 months following the parties' contract expiration on March 31, 2013. Under these circumstances, the Union's charge is untimely. *Natico, Inc.*, 302 NLRB 668 (1991); *Park Inn Home for Adults*, 293 NLRB 1082 (1989); *Chemung Contracting Corp.*, 291 NLRB 773 (1988).

Accordingly, I conclude that the Respondent violated Section 8(a)(5) and (1) only by offering and implementing a new health insurance plan for employees after June 1, 2013.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On October 29, 2013, Road Sprinkler Fitters Local Union No. 669, U.A., AFL-CIO (the Union), filed an unfair labor practice charge alleging that Colorado Fire Sprinkler Inc. (the Respondent) violated Section 8(a)(5) and (1) of the National Labor Relations Act (the Act) by unilaterally discontinuing benefit funds contributions since about June 20, 2013. Region 27 of the National Labor Relations Board (the Board) docketed this charge as Case 27-CA-115977. On January 17, 2014, the Union filed a second charge alleging the Respondent violated Section 8(a)(5) and (1) of the Act by discontinuing contributions to the health and welfare plan as negotiated in the parties' collective-bargaining agreement and by implementing a new health insurance plan for employees about December 2013. Region 27 docketed this charge as Case 27-CA-120823. Following an investigation into the charges, the Board's General Counsel, through the Acting Regional Director for Region 27, issued a consolidated complaint on August 22, 2014. The Respondent filed an answer to the complaint on September 4, 2014, denying that it engaged in any unlawful conduct and asserting multiple affirmative defenses.

I conducted a trial on the complaint on December 2, 2014, in Pueblo, Colorado. Counsel for the parties filed post-hearing briefs in support of their positions on January 6, 2015, which I have considered. On the entire record, including my observation of the demeanor of witnesses, I make the following findings of fact and conclusions of law.

FINDINGS OF FACT

I. Jurisdiction and Labor Organization Status

The Respondent installs, services, and inspects fire sprinkler systems, principally in commercial settings. The base of its business operations is an office in Pueblo, Colorado. On an

annual basis, the Respondent purchases and receives at its Pueblo facility goods valued in excess of \$50,000 from points outside the state of Colorado and from other enterprises located within the state of Colorado, each of which other enterprises receives the goods directly from points outside the state of Colorado. Accordingly, and at all material times, I find that the Respondent
 5 has been an employer engaged in commerce within the meaning of Section 2(2), (6), and (7) of the Act and is subject to the Board's jurisdiction, as the Respondent admits in its answer to the complaint. The Respondent also admits, and I find, that the Union is a labor organization within the meaning of Section 2(5) of the Act.

10 II. Alleged Unfair Labor Practices

Owner Kent Stringer founded Colorado Fire Sprinkler in 1991. The Union represents journeymen sprinkler fitters and apprentices. The Respondent first hired such employees in April 1994 and consistently has employed more than one since that time. The Union's business
 15 agent is Richard Gessner. He is responsible for represented employees in District 4, which includes Colorado and Wyoming.¹

A. The Terms of the Parties' Contracts

20 The Union and the Respondent first entered into an "Assent and Interim Agreement" in 1991, at a time when Stringer did not have any employees. From November 1, 1991, through March 31, 2013, the parties agreed to seven, successive contracts which, by their terms, bound the Respondent to the associated national collective-bargaining agreements negotiated by the National Fire Sprinkler Association (NFSA) and the Union.

25 On March 28, 2005, the Respondent and the Union entered into their fifth assent and interim agreement (2005 assent agreement). With respect to recognition, this agreement stated:

30 The Employer hereby freely and unequivocally acknowledges that it has verified the Union's status as the exclusive bargaining representative of its employees pursuant to Section 9(a) of the National Labor Relations Act, as amended, for the purpose of establishing wages, hours, and working conditions for all journeymen sprinkler fitters, apprentices and unindentured
 35 apprentice applicants in the employ of the Employer, and that the

¹ Five witnesses testified at the hearing, with the two principal ones being Gessner for the Union and Stringer for the Respondent. The record testimony, by and large, is not contradictory. As to overall witness credibility where conflicts exist, I credit Stringer's testimony except as otherwise, specifically noted in this decision. None of the witnesses had extensive recall of the material events, including the two bargaining sessions central to the unilateral change allegations. However, Stringer's testimony was specific and detailed with respect to the things he could recall. Gessner, in contrast, appeared to have little recollection of his interaction with the Respondent. He often could not recall events he was asked about or qualified his answers with phrases such as "I think." He also frequently had to be prompted through leading questions or have his memory refreshed with the use of affidavits previously given to the Board for responses, including on certain critical issues. As a result, I find Stringer's testimony to be more reliable.

Union has offered to provide the Employer with confirmation of its support by a majority of such employees.

By other terms of the 2005 assent agreement, the Respondent agreed to be bound to the national collective-bargaining agreement between NFSA and the Union, which ran from April 1, 2005, to March 31, 2007 (2005 national agreement). Regarding recognition, article 3 of the 2005 national agreement stated:

The National Fire Sprinkler Association, Inc. for and on behalf of its contractor members that have given written authorization and all other employing contractors becoming signatory hereto, recognize the Union as the sole and exclusive bargaining representative for all Journeymen Sprinkler Fitters and Apprentices in the employ of said Employers, who are engaged in all work as set forth in Article 18 of this Agreement with respect to wages, hours and other conditions of employment pursuant to Section 9(a) of the National Labor Relations Act.

The parties likewise signed assent and interim agreements in 2007 and 2010. The recognition language in these agreements stated:

The Employer hereby freely and unequivocally acknowledges that it has previously confirmed to its full satisfaction and continues to recognize the Union's status as the exclusive bargaining representative of its employees pursuant to Section 9(a) of the National Labor Relations Act, as amended, for the purpose of establishing wages, hours, and working conditions for all journeymen sprinkler fitters, apprentices and unindentured apprentice applicants in the employ of the Employer.

The Respondent also agreed to be bound by the respective national agreements for 2007 and 2010. The recognition language in those agreements was identical to that in the 2005 national agreement, quoted above.

The Respondent and the Union did not engage in contract negotiations at any point during the time period covered by their seven assent agreements. The Union simply sent a new agreement to Stringer, who then signed and returned it.

The 2010 national agreement required the Respondent to make monthly contributions to the National Automatic Sprinkler Industry (NASI) Welfare Fund, the NASI Pension Fund, the NASI-Local 669 Industry Education Fund, and the Sprinkler Industry Supplemental (SIS) Defined Contribution Pension Fund (collectively, the benefit funds) for hours worked by Respondent's journeymen sprinkler fitters and apprentices. The payments to the NASI Welfare Fund enabled the Respondent's employees to obtain health insurance coverage through the Union. As an owner, Stringer also received health insurance through the fund.

Fund payments are due on the 15th of each month for the preceding month. Gessner receives a monthly delinquency report from the fund which identifies the employers in his district that are behind on benefit funds contributions. The report operates on a 2-month lag. For example, Gessner received a delinquency report on May 7, 2013, which showed nonpayments through March 2013. (GC Exh. 8A.)

B. The Parties' Communications Prior to April 29, 2013

After many years of successful business operations, the Respondent began experiencing financial difficulties in 2010. According to Stringer, those difficulties were the result of the poor economy, particularly in Pueblo, as well as competition from nonunion companies.

At the beginning of 2010, Stringer spoke to Gessner before signing the 2010 assent agreement. Stringer advised Gessner that his business was struggling and he did not know whether he could comply with the obligations of the 2010 national agreement. Following the conversation, Stringer waited a couple of months until June 2010, but did ultimately sign the 2010 assent agreement.

Via letter dated November 30, 2012, the Union notified the Respondent of its intent to terminate the 2010 national agreement and negotiate a new national contract. Around this same time, Stringer met with Gessner and again told him that the company was struggling. Stringer said he could not sign a new contract if he did not get some kind of economic relief from the Union. He specifically told Gessner the economy would not support his complying with the contract.

The Respondent stopped making monthly benefit funds contributions beginning in January 2013, three months prior to the expiration of the 2010 national agreement.²

In February 2013, the Union sent another assent and interim agreement to Stringer. Gessner then called Stringer and asked him if he was going to sign the agreement. Stringer told him no, stating "I won't enter into a contract I can't comply with." (Tr. 170.)

The 2010 national agreement expired on March 31, 2013. In that same month, Gessner would have received the fund's delinquency report indicating the Respondent had not made the benefit fund contributions for January.

In early April 2013, multiple employees advised Gessner that Stringer had a meeting with them on April 5 where he stated he was going to have to go nonunion because he could no longer

² The documentary evidence in the record suggests that the Respondent stopped making contributions even earlier, in December 2012. A letter from the NASI funds dated March 4, 2013, to the Respondent noted delinquent payments for December 2012 and January 2013. (R. Exh. 6.) Also in March 2013, Stringer and employees of the Respondent received "Forecast Termination" letters from the fund stating that their health insurance would be terminated on March 31, 2013, due to delinquent contributions (R. Exhs. 2-5.) Gessner testified that employees lose their insurance after four months of delinquent fund payments (Tr. 44), meaning a such a termination would be based on the cessation of contributions in December 2012. However, both Gessner and Stringer testified that the delinquent contributions began in January 2013 and neither party contends otherwise in their briefs.

afford to be a union contractor. Within about a week, and before April 29, a conversation between the two ensued. Stringer told Gessner again that the national agreement's wages and benefits were too much and he could not compete with a nonunion competitor. Gessner told Stringer that he had to continue terms and negotiate a new contract. Stringer replied that he was not aware that he had to do either. Stringer said he wanted to remain a union contractor but could not afford the funds. Gessner mentioned that the Respondent had an outstanding debt with the NASI funds, and advised Stringer that NASI made settlement agreements for contractors that fell behind on fund payments. Stringer told Gessner that he "was going to catch up the funds through the end of the contract," i.e. the funds payments through March 2013. (Tr. 202.)

On April 25, 2013, the Union filed an unfair labor practice charge with the NLRB which alleged: "On or about April 1, 2013, and continuing, the Employer has unilaterally changed the terms and conditions of employment by, inter alia, discontinuing contributions to benefit funds." (GC Exh. 4.) At the time of this charge filing, the Respondent was delinquent on benefit funds payments for January, February, and March 2013. Gessner was aware of this, having received a copy of a letter from counsel for the funds to Stringer noting the delinquency. (GC Exh. 6.)

In a letter dated May 2, Stringer asked the Union to withdraw its NLRB charge because "negotiations would be far more productive" and he "would like to resolve the benefits issues between the Union[,] the Trust and my firm." (GC Exh. 5.) Based upon Stringer's expression that he was willing to negotiate a new contract, the Union withdrew the charge on May 10. (GC Exhs. 9, 10.) The withdrawal was not based on any resolution of the delinquent benefit funds contributions.³ (Tr. 62.)

C. The June 21 Bargaining Session

On June 21, the parties held their first bargaining session for a new contract at the Union's hall in Pueblo. Gessner and Michael Lee, a member of the Union's western region executive board, attended for the Union. Stringer, his brother Marlin Stringer, his daughter Sarah Blackwell, and his son-in-law Robert Blackwell, attended for the Respondent. Most of the discussion that day centered on the Respondent's financial difficulties and potential measures the Union could take to help the company weather the storm.

Regarding the delinquent fund payments, Stringer reiterated that they were too expensive for him and that he was there to negotiate a new contract. He expressed concern to Gessner that the Union was putting forth the 2013 national agreement, and the associated benefit funds contributions, as their initial contract proposal. Stringer noted his ongoing struggle over repaying the contributions he owed under the 2010 national agreement. When Stringer asked Gessner whether the 2013 national agreement was the Union's proposal, Gessner responded "No, that is off the table."⁴ (Tr. 175-176; GC Exh. 26.)

³ The findings of fact regarding the pre-April 29 communications, in particular the conversations between Stringer and Gessner, are based on the credited testimony of both individuals. Each person remembered different portions of these conversations and their recollections were not contradictory.

⁴ At the hearing, the main factual dispute was over what happened next. Stringer and Sarah Blackwell testified that Gessner then said "you're not accumulating debt." Lee testified that Gessner said he could not do anything about the delinquent fund payments, and Gessner said that he did not agree to waive or resolve the benefit funds issues. As discussed more fully below, whether Gessner said "you're

With respect to health insurance, Stringer told Gessner that he eventually would have to get insurance for his people.

At the end of the meeting, Stringer provided his initial contract proposals to the Union. The proposals included deleting all benefit funds contributions and providing employees with a different health insurance plan.⁵ (GC Exh. 18.) Gessner said he would look them over and provide them to his business manager. Gessner also told Stringer he would call him to schedule the next negotiation meeting.

At some, unidentified point after this meeting but prior to the next bargaining session on October 29, the Respondent offered its fitters and apprentices the opportunity to join an Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield health insurance plan which its office employees had access to. At least seven employees signed up for this plan. The Respondent stipulated that it did this without first notifying or bargaining with the Union. Stringer's action was prompted by an employee requesting to get on the office plan, after the employee's wife attempted to use the union health insurance plan for their child's medical care and was denied.

On a date after the June 21 session, the Respondent also paid off its delinquent fund contributions, but only through March 31, 2013.

D. The October 29 Bargaining Session

The parties did not meet again for negotiations until October 29, more than 4 months later. Gessner attributed the delay to things being hectic after a change in business managers. However, he also indicated that he spoke with the new business manager around the end of July concerning the Respondent's bargaining proposals. The Respondent did not contact the Union about the delay prior to Gessner requesting another bargaining session on October 16.

not accumulating debt" does not impact the outcome of the case. However, if a credibility determination was required, I would find that Gessner did not make that statement based upon the record evidence. Unbeknownst to and without the consent of the Respondent, Lee was recording what occurred at this bargaining session. During cross examination, counsel for the General Counsel played a portion of the recording following Gessner's statement that the 2013 national agreement was off the table, and both Stringer and Blackwell acknowledged that the recording did not contain the second statement. Stringer also testified that he previously listened to the entire recording and did not hear Gessner's alleged statement. Sarah Blackwell's contemporaneous notes document Gessner's statement that the 2013 national agreement was off the table, but do not contain the alleged statement concerning no debt being accumulated. Finally, I find it unlikely that Gessner would make such a statement in light of his previously stated position that the Respondent had to continue the terms and conditions of the 2013 national agreement while a new contract was being negotiated.

⁵ The Respondent's proposal included the language "freeze pension contributions for term of agreement." It is not clear from that plain language whether the proposal meant to completely stop pension fund contributions or freeze the contributions at the level contained in the 2010 national agreement. However, given Stringer's consistent position with Gessner prior to these proposals being made, I find the proposal was intended to stop the Respondent's contributions to the pension funds following the 2010 national agreement.

On October 29, Gessner informed Stringer that some or all of the employees had lost their health insurance. Stringer replied that he had allowed the employees to join the office program. Gessner then said that they had violated the contract by doing that and the Union would file charges. Gessner asked for a copy of the new health insurance plan. Gessner also stated that Stringer would have to get his ongoing fund liabilities caught up. He showed Stringer a copy of an unfunded withdrawal liability letter from the benefit funds, which indicated that the Respondent would owe \$1.2 million if it withdrew from the plans.

On this same date, the Union filed an NLRB charge in Case 27-CA-115977 which alleged the following violation of Section 8(a)(5): “On or about June 20, 2013, and continuing, the Employer unilaterally changed the terms and conditions of employment by, inter alia, discontinuing contributions to benefit funds.”

ANALYSIS

I. The 2005 Assent Agreement Established a 9(a) Bargaining Relationship.

The General Counsel’s complaint alleges that the Respondent unlawfully and unilaterally discontinued contributions to union benefit funds since about April 1, 2013, and ceased offering health insurance through the Union’s health and welfare fund and began offering employees a new health insurance plan after June 1, 2013. These allegations are premised on the Respondent and the Union having a 9(a), as opposed to 8(f), bargaining relationship. The General Counsel contends the 9(a) relationship is established solely by the contract language in the parties’ 2005 assent agreement.

A contract provision will be independently sufficient to establish a union’s 9(a) representation status where the language unequivocally indicates (1) the union requested recognition as the majority or 9(a) representative of the unit employees; (2) the employer recognized the union as the majority or 9(a) bargaining representative; and (3) the employer’s recognition was based on the union’s having shown, or having offered to show, evidence of its majority status. *DiPonio Construction Co., Inc.*, 357 NLRB No. 99 (2011); *Staunton Fuel & Material*, 335 NLRB 717 (2001). A reference to Section 9(a) in the contract language is indicative of the parties’ intent to establish such a bargaining relationship. In addition, the request for recognition can be fairly implied from the contract language stating that the employer has granted such recognition.

The language of the 2005 assent agreement meets the requirements of *Staunton Fuel & Material* based upon the clear and unambiguous first sentence of the provision. That sentence states the Respondent “freely and unequivocally acknowledges that it has verified the Union’s status as the exclusive bargaining representative of its employees pursuant to Section 9(a) of the National Labor Relations Act.” By acknowledging that it has “verified” the Union’s majority status and by signing the assent agreement, the Respondent recognized the Union and the Union’s request for recognition can be fairly implied out of that grant of recognition. In addition, the Respondent could not have “verified” majority status without the Union having shown evidence of its majority support. The contract language indicating that the Union “offered to provide the Employer with confirmation of its support by a majority of such

employees” is superfluous, but also would demonstrate that the third requirement of *Staunton Fuel & Material* has been met.

The 2005 national agreement contains no provisions to the contrary. Rather, the recognition clause in that agreement reiterates that the Respondent “recognize[s] the Union as the sole and exclusive bargaining representative” of its employees “pursuant to Section 9(a).” Furthermore, nothing in the subsequent assent or national agreements conflicts with the Union’s previously established 9(a) status.

My conclusion is consistent with the Board’s decision in *King’s Fire Protection, Inc.*, 358 NLRB No. 156 (2012). That case involved the same union and the identical contract language, with the employer there also contesting the Union’s 9(a) status. The Board adopted the administrative law judge’s conclusion that the contract language, standing alone, was sufficient to establish a 9(a) bargaining relationship. While the decision is not binding precedent in light of *NLRB v. Noel Canning*, __ U.S. __, 134 S.Ct. 2550 (2014), I find the Board’s analysis persuasive and I adopt it.⁶

In its brief, the Respondent urges me to follow the D.C. Circuit’s decision in *Nova Plumbing, Inc. v. NLRB*, 330 F.3d 531 (D.C. Cir. 2003). In that case, the court of appeals found that 9(a) status could not be attained solely by contract language, but required an evidentiary showing that a majority of employees supported the union at the time the contract was agreed to. The decision was grounded in concern that the Board’s *Staunton Fuel & Material* approach could result in granting 9(a) status to a union that does not have the majority support of employees in the bargaining unit, despite contract language indicating that such a majority exists. This case certainly highlights the concern. Stringer signed the first assent agreement in 1991, when he had no employees. Nonetheless, the agreement still stated the Respondent confirmed that a majority of its sprinkler fitters “have designated, are members of, and are represented by” the Union. Although he hired employees in 1994, Stringer simply signed subsequent assent agreements in 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2005 which union representatives mailed to him, without engaging in any negotiations. (Tr. 158–159.) Despite the contract language indicating that majority status was “verified,” Stringer could not recall the Union ever presenting him with evidence of its majority support. (Tr. 160.) That seems likely in light of the sequence of events. Even if it had, such a showing logically would have occurred in 1994, not in 2005.

Nonetheless, a judge’s duty is to apply established Board precedent which the U.S. Supreme Court has not reversed. It is for the Board, not me, to determine whether Board precedent should be altered. *Austin Fire Equipment, LLC*, 360 NLRB No. 131, slip op. at 2 fn. 6 (2014). Under extant Board precedent, the contract language in the 2005 assent agreement meets the *Staunton Fuel* requirements.

The Respondent’s other arguments regarding the contract language can be dispensed with in short order. The Respondent contends that it should not be bound by the terms of the assent

⁶ The *King’s Fire Protection* case remains pending. The Board filed a petition for enforcement of its order in the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals. In light of the *Noel Canning* decision, the court of appeals remanded the case to the Board, which accepted the remand on September 18, 2014. The Board is now reconsidering the case with its full, five-member compliment.

agreements it entered into with the Union because the parties did not negotiate those agreements. However, Stringer signed the agreements as the Respondent's owner and, by that act, bound the Respondent to the contracts' terms. The Respondent also argues that the recognition language in the assent agreements in 1991, 1994, 1997, and 2000 was insufficient to establish a 9(a) relationship. Those agreements are irrelevant in light of the fact that the General Counsel's complaint alleges the 9(a) relationship began with the 2005 assent agreement. Finally, the Respondent asserts that Stringer never intended to establish a 9(a) bargaining relationship and the Union's conduct indicated it did not believe it had that status. While Stringer may have thought the relationship could be terminated at the expiration of a contract, his intent, and the Union's beliefs, are irrelevant in light of the clear and unambiguous contract language in the 2005 assent agreement. Extrinsic evidence regarding the parties' intent is not considered where contract language is clear and unambiguous, and thereby conclusively notifies the parties that a 9(a) relationship is intended. *Madison Industries, Inc.*, 349 NLRB 1306, 1308 (2007).

Accordingly, I find that the parties' 2005 assent agreement established a 9(a) bargaining relationship between the Respondent and the Union.

With such a relationship established, the Respondent cannot now, almost a decade after signing the 2005 assent agreement, challenge the 9(a) status of the Union. *Staunton Fuel & Material*, supra, 335 NLRB at 719-720 fns. 10, 14. Section 10(b) of the Act requires that such a challenge be filed within 6 months after written recognition was given. Once that period expires, an employer may terminate its bargaining obligation only by affirmatively showing that the union lost majority support, pursuant to the requirements of *Levitz Furniture Co.*, 333 NLRB 717 (2001). No such showing was made here.

II. *The Respondent Unilaterally Changed Employees' Terms and Conditions of Employment by Ceasing Benefit Funds Contributions and the Union-Provided Health Insurance Plan, as well as by Implementing a New Health Insurance Plan.*

Where parties are engaged in negotiations for a collective-bargaining agreement, an employer's obligation to refrain from unilateral changes extends beyond the mere duty to provide notice and an opportunity to bargain about a particular subject matter; rather, it encompasses a duty to refrain from implementation at all, absent overall impasse on bargaining for the agreement as a whole. *NLRB v. Katz*, 369 U.S. 736 (1962); *Bottom Line Enterprises*, 302 NLRB 373 (1991). Pension, health, and welfare plans provided for in an expired contract constitute a term and condition of employment that survives expiration, and cannot be altered without bargaining. *Butera Finer Foods*, 343 NLRB 197 (2004); *Hardesty Co., Inc.*, 336 NLRB 258 (2001).

While negotiating with the Union on a new contract, the Respondent was required to maintain the status quo with respect to employees' terms and conditions of employment. This included making benefit funds payments and continuing the health insurance provided by the Union's NASI Welfare Fund. The Respondent stipulated that it ceased making benefit funds contributions as of April 1, 2013, which resulted in employees losing their union-provided health insurance. It also stipulated that, at some point between June and October 2013, it offered bargaining unit employees a new health insurance plan and signed up at least seven employees. Without question, these actions constituted changes to employees' terms and conditions of

employment. Moreover, the Respondent made these changes unilaterally and it does not contend that the parties had reached a bargaining impasse on a new contract. Thus, the unilateral changes violated the Act, absent a valid affirmative defense.

5 III. *The Complaint Allegations Regarding the Cessation of Benefit Funds Contributions and of the Union-Provided Health Insurance Plan Are Time Barred by Section 10(b).*

10 In its answer, the Respondent affirmatively asserted a 10(b) defense to both unilateral change allegations in the consolidated complaint, claiming they are time barred.

15 Section 10(b) of the Act states that “no complaint shall issue based upon any unfair labor practice occurring more than six months prior to the filing of the charge with the Board and the service of a copy thereof upon the person against whom such charge is made.” The 10(b) period begins to run when the aggrieved party receives actual or constructive notice of the conduct that constitutes the alleged unfair labor practice. *United Kiser Services, LLC*, 355 NLRB 319, 319–320 (2010). The Respondent bears the burden of proving this defense.

20 The General Counsel’s complaint allegation regarding the benefit funds contributions is based on the charge filed by the Union on October 29, 2013. Thus, the 10(b) period runs back 6 months to April 29 and the Respondent must prove that the Union had actual or constructive notice of the cessation of benefit funds contributions prior to then.

25 In cases like this one alleging a cessation of fund payments, 10(b) bars a finding that an employer violated the Act by failing to make contributions after the expiration of the contract setting forth the payment obligations, when the charge is filed more than 6 months after expiration of the contract and the union had notice of the failure outside the 10(b) period. *Chemung Contracting Corp.*, 291 NLRB 773, 774 (1988). The Board previously has dealt with factual situations comparable to the one in this case and concluded that the General Counsel’s allegations were time barred. In *Natico, Inc.*, 302 NLRB 668 (1991), the contract requiring the fund payments expired on December 16, 1985, the payment cessation occurred 20 months earlier, and the charge was not filed until August 19, 1986, or more than 8 months following expiration. In *Park Inn Home for Adults*, 293 NLRB 1082 (1989), the contract expired on October 31, 1976, the payment cessation occurred 2 years prior to expiration, and the charge was not filed until September 11, 1978, or nearly 2 years following expiration. Here, the Union had actual notice of the Respondent’s cessation of benefit fund contributions in mid-March 2013 when Gessner received the delinquency report for January 2013. In addition, the contract expired on March 31, 2013, but the Union did not file its second charge until October 29, 2013. Thus, the bright-line test of *Chemung Contracting* has been met in this case, because the Union had notice of the cessation of payments outside the 10(b) period and did not file its charge until almost 7 months following contract expiration.

45 This case does involve the additional fact, not present in *Natico* or *Park Inn Home*, that the Respondent ultimately cured its delinquent fund contributions through the expiration of the parties’ last contract. However, I find that additional fact does not warrant a different outcome. No dispute exists that the Respondent stopped making benefit funds contributions in January 2013. That conduct went beyond a statement of intent or threat and that was when the unfair labor practice occurred. Between that missed payment and April 29, Stringer consistently

conveyed to Gessner that he viewed the bargaining relationship as a temporary one, terminable at the end of the contract, and that he would not sign another contract that required the benefit funds contributions. He also told Gessner he was not aware he had to continue employees' terms and conditions of employment. Stringer stated to Gessner that he would try to repay his delinquent funds contributions, but only through the March 31 expiration of the contract. Stringer gave no indication whatsoever that he would continue payments after the contract expired. Based on these communications, the Union knew, or should have known, that the Respondent would not make any contributions following the expiration of the parties' contract.

Stringer's actions after April 29 regarding the contributions likewise were consistent. The Union withdrew the first charge on May 10 after Stringer expressed that negotiations, on a new contract, would be far more productive. He gave no assurances, express or implied, that he would resume benefit funds contributions in exchange for the withdrawal of the charge. When he stated in his May 2 letter that he would like to resolve the benefits issues with the Union, he could only have been referencing fund contributions through the March 2013 end of the prior contract, because the April payment was not due until May 15. In a letter dated May 20, he thanked the Union for withdrawing the charge "since we can concentrate on trying to enter into a contract." (GC Exh. 12.) At the June 21 meeting, Stringer again told Gessner that the funds were too expensive for him, then provided a contract proposal pursuant to which all benefit funds contributions would cease. Thereafter, Stringer paid off his delinquent benefit funds payments, but only through March 31, 2013.

Thus, the Respondent did not give conflicting signals or engage in ambiguous conduct after it repudiated its contractual obligation and ceased making benefit funds contributions in January 2013. Rather, Stringer made it clear that he would try to make up delinquent payments through the end of the contract, but would not resume the contributions thereafter.

Accordingly, I conclude that the General Counsel's allegation as to the cessation of contributions to the benefit funds is time barred. I also find that the 10(b) bar applies to the complaint allegation addressing the Respondent's cessation of offering health insurance through the NASI Welfare Fund. That allegation is tied to the Respondent's cessation of benefit funds contributions. Gessner knew employees would lose their health insurance after the 4th month of delinquent contributions. (Tr. 44.) The Union also received copies of the "forecast termination" letters sent to employees in March 2013, which alerted Gessner to the possibility that they would lose their health insurance as early as March 31.

However, Section 10(b) does not bar the allegation concerning the Respondent's implementation of the new health insurance plan at some point between June and October 2013. Stringer did not give Gessner clear and unequivocal notice of that unilateral change at the June 21 bargaining session. He expressed only the possibility that he might offer his employees a new health insurance plan in the future. The clear and unequivocal notice of that change occurred at the October 29 session, when Stringer told Gessner he had allowed his employees to join the office plan. The Union's charge asserting that unilateral change was filed on January 17, 2014. The filing was well within the 10(b) period, which ran through April 29, 2014.

Therefore, I find that the Respondent unlawfully offered and implemented a new health insurance plan after June 1, 2013, at a time when it was bargaining for a new collective bargaining agreement and had not reached impasse.

5 IV. *The Respondent's Remaining Affirmative Defenses Were Not Substantiated.*

10 The Respondent contends that its cessation of benefit funds contributions and subsequent implementation of a new health insurance plan were justified due to economic exigencies. See *RBE Electronics of S.D., Inc.*, 320 NLRB 80 (1995). The economic exigency exception carries a heavy burden. An employer must show that a unilateral change was prompted by extraordinary, unforeseeable events having a major economic effect that mandates immediate action. A loss of significant accounts or contracts or operation at a competitive disadvantage do not justify unilateral action. Here, the Respondent's financial difficulties began back in 2010 and were due to the poor economy and increased competition from nonunion companies. Stringer also raised
15 concern over the benefit funds contributions prior to signing the 2010 assent agreement. Because the Respondent's financial difficulties began at least 3 years before it ceased making benefit funds contributions, these circumstances were not unforeseen, extraordinary events that would justify unilateral changes.

20 The Respondent also defends its unilateral actions by contending the Union engaged in dilatory tactics during bargaining. See *M&M Contractors*, 262 NLRB 1472 (1982). This defense cannot apply to the benefit funds allegation, because the Respondent ceased making contributions prior to the parties' first bargaining session on June 21 and it was at that session where the Respondent first proposed eliminating the contributions. The Respondent did offer the
25 new health insurance plan to employees during a 4-month delay between the June and October bargaining sessions. However, the Respondent made no effort during that period to reach out to the Union and expedite negotiations. This tacit acceptance of the delay prevents the Respondent from using it to justify unilateral action.

30 Finally, the Respondent contends that the Union either consented to the unilateral changes or waived its right to bargain over them. With respect to the cessation of benefit funds contributions, the Respondent points to the alleged statement by Gessner in the June 21 bargaining session that "you're not accumulating debt." Even if I were to find that Gessner made this statement, its plain language neither constitutes the Union's agreement to the cessation
35 of benefit funds contributions, nor does it reflect a clear and unmistakable waiver of the Union's right to bargain over continued benefit funds contributions. As to health insurance, the Union did not have clear and unequivocal notice of the Respondent's change until the October 29 bargaining session. Gessner immediately objected to the change. That likewise does not constitute consent or waiver. The Union was not required to object at the June 21 session,
40 because Stringer only indicated it was a possibility he would offer new insurance.

V. LEGAL FINDINGS SUMMARY

45 To summarize, then, I conclude that the parties have a 9(a) bargaining relationship. Given that relationship, the Respondent was required to maintain the status quo as to employees' terms and conditions of employment following expiration of the 2010 national agreement. Its cessation of benefit funds contributions and of the associated health insurance plan, as well as its

implementation of a new health insurance plan, were unlawful unilateral changes. However, the complaint allegations regarding the cessation of benefit funds contributions and the cessation of offering the related union health insurance plan are time barred by Section 10(b). Thus, the Respondent violated the Act only by its offering and implementation of a new health insurance plan after June 1, 2013.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. The Respondent is an employer engaged in commerce within the meaning of Section 2(2), (6), and (7) of the Act.
2. The Union is a labor organization within the meaning of Section 2(5) of the Act.
3. The Respondent has violated Section 8(a)(1) and (5) by unilaterally offering and implementing a new health insurance plan for employees at some point between June and October 2013.
4. The above unfair labor practice affects commerce within the meaning of Section 2(2), (6), and (7) of the Act.
5. The complaint allegations that the Respondent violated Section 8(a)(5) and (1) of the Act by unilaterally ceasing to make benefit funds contributions from April 1, 2003, forward, and the resulting cessation of the employees' health insurance plan provided through the NASI Welfare Fund, are time barred by Section 10(b) of the Act and must be dismissed.

REMEDY

Having found that the Respondent engaged in certain unfair labor practices, I find that it must be ordered to cease and desist and to take certain affirmative action designed to effectuate the policies of the Act. Although I must include in the order a requirement that the Respondent rescind the unilateral change it made at some point from June to October 2013 to employees' health insurance by offering unit employees a new health insurance plan, I note that such a rescission of the employees' new health insurance coverage only will occur upon the request of the Union.

On these findings of fact and conclusions of law and on the entire record, I issue the following recommended⁷

ORDER

The Respondent, Colorado Fire Sprinkler Inc., Pueblo, Colorado, its officers, agents, successors, and assigns, shall

⁷ If no exceptions are filed as provided by Sec. 102.46 of the Board's Rules and Regulations, the findings, conclusions, and recommended Order shall, as provided in Sec. 102.48 of the Rules, be adopted by the Board and all objections to them shall be deemed waived for all purposes.

1. Cease and desist from

(a) Failing and refusing to bargain collectively with Road Sprinkler Fitters Local Union No. 669, U.A., AFL-CIO (the Union) as the exclusive collective bargaining representative of its unit employees (journeymen sprinkler fitters, apprentices, and unindentured apprentice applicants) by making unilateral changes to the health insurance benefits of those employees in the absence of an overall lawful bargaining impasse.

(b) In any like or related manner interfering with, restraining, or coercing employees in the exercise of the rights guaranteed them by Section 7 of the Act.

2. Take the following affirmative action necessary to effectuate the policies of the Act.

(a) Upon request of the Union, rescind the unilaterally implemented changes to unit employees' health insurance coverage made after June 1, 2013.

(b) Within 14 days after service by the Region, post at its facility in Pueblo, Colorado, copies of the attached notice marked "Appendix."⁸ Copies of the notice, on forms provided by the Regional Director for Region 27, after being signed by the Respondent's authorized representative, shall be posted by the Respondent and maintained for 60 days in conspicuous places including all places where notices to employees are customarily posted. In addition to physical posting of paper notices, notices shall be distributed electronically, such as by email, posting on an intranet or internet site, and/or other electronic means, if the Respondent customarily communicates with its employees by such means. Reasonable steps shall be taken by the Respondent to ensure that the notices are not altered, defaced, or covered by any other material. In the event that, during the pendency of these proceedings, the Respondent has gone out of business or closed the facilities involved in these proceedings, the Respondent shall duplicate and mail, at its own expense, a copy of the notice to all current employees and former employees employed by the Respondent in the position employed by the Respondent at any time since June 1, 2013.

(c) Within 21 days after service by the Region, file with the Regional Director a sworn certification of a responsible official on a form provided by the

⁸ If this Order is enforced by a judgment of a United States court of appeals, the words in the notice reading "Posted by Order of the National Labor Relations Board" shall read "Posted Pursuant to a Judgment of the United States Court of Appeals Enforcing an Order of the National Labor Relations Board."

Regional Director attesting to the steps the Respondent has taken to comply.

Dated, Washington, D.C. March 23, 2015

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Charles J. Muhl
Administrative Law Judge

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APPENDIX**NOTICE TO EMPLOYEES**

Posted by Order of the
National Labor Relations Board
An Agency of the United States Government

The National Labor Relations Board has found that we violated Federal labor law and has ordered us to post and obey this notice.

FEDERAL LAW GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO

Form, join, or assist a union
Choose representatives to bargain with us on your behalf
Act together with other employees for your benefit and protection
Choose not to engage in any of these protected activities.

WE WILL NOT fail or refuse to bargain collectively with Road Sprinkler Fitters Local Union No. 669, U.A., AFL-CIO (the Union) as the exclusive collective bargaining representative of our unit employees (journeymen sprinkler fitters, apprentices, and unindentured apprentice applicants), by unilaterally changing the health insurance benefits of unit employees in the absence of an overall lawful bargaining impasse.

WE WILL NOT in any like or related manner interfere with, restrain, or coerce you in the exercise of the rights guaranteed you by Section 7 of the Act.

WE WILL, only upon request of the Union, rescind the unilaterally implemented changes to unit employees' health insurance coverage made after June 1, 2013.

COLORADO FIRE SPRINKLER INC.

(Employer)

Dated _____ By _____
(Representative) (Title)

The National Labor Relations Board is an independent Federal agency created in 1935 to enforce the National Labor Relations Act. It conducts secret-ballot elections to determine whether employees want union representation and it investigates and remedies unfair labor practices by employers and unions. To find out more about your rights under the Act and how to file a charge or election petition, you may speak confidentially to any agent with the Board's Regional Office set forth below. You may also obtain information from the Board's website: www.nlrb.gov.

600 17th Street, 7th Floor, North Tower, Denver, CO 80202-5433
(303) 844-3551, Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The Administrative Law Judge's decision can be found at www.nlr.gov/case/27-CA-115977 or by using the QR code below. Alternatively, you can obtain a copy of the decision from the Executive Secretary, National Labor Relations Board, 1099 14th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20570, or by calling (202) 273-1940.



THIS IS AN OFFICIAL NOTICE AND MUST NOT BE DEFACED BY ANYONE

THIS NOTICE MUST REMAIN POSTED FOR 60 CONSECUTIVE DAYS FROM THE DATE OF POSTING AND MUST NOT BE ALTERED, DEFACED, OR COVERED BY ANY OTHER MATERIAL. ANY QUESTIONS CONCERNING THIS NOTICE OR COMPLIANCE WITH ITS PROVISIONS MAY BE DIRECTED TO THE ABOVE REGIONAL OFFICE'S COMPLIANCE OFFICER, (303) 844-6647.